1 Existential Truths

The holocaust and the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were historically unprecedented and extreme threats to the survival of humankind. The communication about such total experiences requires special efforts, mainly in overcoming cultural and generation-specific domain assumptions. Wolff (1974: 648) characterized existential truths as “the result of the most rigorously imaginable intrasubjective experience ... testing what is offered against the least doubtful truth one has managed to hold on to”. All inquiries time and again must be checked by probing their designs, procedures, and results in the light and darkness of one’s generation’s most important experiences, one’s scrutiny of the historical situation and one’s subjective certainty of having reached new ground, valid both in existential and scientific terms.

Since Wolff’s lifetime (1912–2003), the existential conditions for the acquisition of personal truths, of social information and knowledge have shifted toward mass and network mediated standards and types of truth seeking. Moreover, media and ever more Information and Communication Technologies are often used as weapons in political, economic and cultural battles for gaining or defending hegemonic symbols, privileges and power exercise. “Gramsci’s fully articulated concept of hegemony involves four integrally and dialectically related ‘moments’: first, hegemony as social and political leadership; second, hegemony as a political project; third, the realization of this hegemonic project in the concrete institutions and organizational forms of a ‘hegemonic apparatus’; and fourth, ultimately and decisively, the social and political hegemony of the workers’ movement.” (Thomas, 2013: 24f)

The subject’s access to unique-universal truths must in our present age push through mediated dis-/information, entertainment and superficial attention. All of these internalized habits and widely shared world views need to be tested by the exercise of immediate personal human reason, as best we can, affirming only those existential truths that withstand such intra-subjective probing. In order to transfer Wolff’s traditional concept of existential truths to contemporary experiences and discourses, we must specify some criteria for and
conditions of existential in contrast to scientific truths (Noeth 2013) and connect Wolff's original concept to current networks of outrage and hope (Castells 2012), in full awareness of the continuous danger of human self-annihilation, contradictory types of evidence, and long-term threats across generations.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, dominant imaginations (Mansell 2012), anxieties, or hopes have been deeply shaped and framed for more people by the Internet. Thereby emerged the potential of shared mediated experiences and immediate responses in real time via mass self-communication (as Castells coined this communication upheaval). Wolff himself still basically relied on the subject's immediate access to unique-universal existential truths, rooted in “Enlightenment epistemology” (Moon, 1993: 308) and offered only few accounts of how to communicate them to others in order to share similar orientations. For deep-level inquiries, immediate experiences and personal discourses remain major components (Psathas 2003 and Habermas 2012), especially concerning what is considered as factual (Pfeiffer 2013). The assumptions and convictions gained in these special contexts are usually taken for granted also in order to identify mediated presentations to be considered of special importance. But even if and when widely shared worldviews arise that combine immediate certainties with mediated communication, they need to be tested again by personal experiences, on which first trust is based (Quandt 2012, see also Morgner 2013).

Existential truths are rooted in the skin-deep awareness of openly diverse evaluations and anxieties, hopes and dreams, taboo zones and “holy,” unquestioned sites. But these fundamental experiences are perceived and evaluated in terms of hybrid experiences combining mediated and immediate encounters of “media life” (Deuze 2012). They are grounded in techno-economic-military efforts. For example: “Vannevar Bush was the director of the Manhattan Project ... developing the atomic bomb. ... The theory and design of internet and its protocols (such as hypertext) can be considered to be inspired by Bush’s suggestions for a hypermedia artifact that establishes links between different types of information.” (Deuze, 2012: 71)

In contrast to Habermas’s theory of communicative action, which alerted us concerning the colonization of the life-world as early as 1981 and in contrast to recent and current emphases on the “mediation” or “mediatization” of everything (Livingstone 2009; Couldry and Hepp 2017), existential truths and long-term horizons must take into account that the life-world has already been colonized to a high degree, during the past decades, e.g., by the identity models and habits enhanced by commercial mass and network media, their messages, protocols, codes, and via new means of surveillance. (See Ludes 2017a and b.) Constructive alternatives to repressive hegemonies therefore “call into being